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## Lake Erie levels hit 35-year low

*By Dave Hall Star Staff Reporter*

The lowest water levels in 35 years are playing havoc with shipping and commercial fishing operations on Lake Erie, industry officials said Tuesday.

But the impact on the environment may not be known for some time.

Little rain and lingering warm temperatures have reduced Lake Erie's water level to 570.2 feet above sea level which is only 2 1/2 inches above its November 1966 low, according to figures released by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

"Last season, we lost 18 inches of draft because of lower water levels in the lakes and that cost us \$2 million in revenue," said Al Vanagas, general manager of operations for Algoma Central Marine.

"Normally, we can load 28,000 tons onto our vessels," he said. "But if that drops to 25,000 or 26,000 because of lower water, our trip price remains the same but revenue drops because we can't carry as much cargo.

"And we're looking at a similar situation by the time this season ends."

The potential impact on the environment is much slower but no less serious.

"Decreased water levels in the lakes and in the Detroit River could bring contaminated sediment which is now buried back to the surface," said Stan Reitsma of the Great Lakes Institute. "It's something we simply don't know yet."

Lower water levels are already having an impact on people who take their living from the lakes.

"Our fishing boats only have a six-foot draft and they're rubbing on the bottom most days from 100 yards out all the way in," said Murray Loop, chairman of the Wheatley Harbour Authority and past owner of Loop Fisheries. "We had the harbour dug out last year at a cost of \$100,000 and it needs doing again.

"On a day with strong winds from the west or northwest, the level can drop a foot in an hour and that creates problems for boats trying to get back in," said Loop.

"When a bad day is forecast, some guys don't even go out and that affects their livelihood."

Navigation channels are dredged to seaway levels of 27 1/2 feet, but strong winds can move the waters in the lake and affect navigational conditions.

"Lower water levels mean the margin of navigational error is also much lower," said Windsor harbour master Bill Marshall. "Ships trying to navigate the channel may face delays in the Detroit River or at the other end of the lake and delays mean money in any business."

The water level in Lake Erie fluctuates less than in the other Great Lakes but since all are part of the same shipping system, the lowest level dictates conditions.

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[Back](#)

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